

ATASCADERO HIGH SCHOOL

Racial Issues

Race is still a divisive issue in the United States today. People are not born prejudiced; they learn intolerance. Indeed, prejudice and bigotry, from racism to sexism to religious intolerance, is learned behavior. This behavior can be unlearned or, at the very least, discouraged. Our children will inherit the repulsive legacies of bigotry and intolerance unless parents and educators recognize and overcome the conditions that contribute to this behavior. Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, said:

“If you as parents cut corners, your children will too. If you lie, they will too. And if parents snicker at racial and gender jokes, another generation will pass on the poison adults still have not had the courage to snuff out.”

Just how well do our schools address the malignancy of bigotry and intolerance? Specifically, how well does Atascadero High School address these issues?

ORIGIN

After hearing about reports of racial incidents at Atascadero High School (AHS), the Grand Jury initiated an inquiry into the issues of racial, religious and gender discrimination along with sexual harassment at AHS. In particular, the inquiry focused on the alleged failure of AHS administration, and the Atascadero Unified School District (District) to respond to racial incidents in a timely and sensitive manner and discipline those responsible.

AUTHORITY

California Penal Code §933.5 states: “A grand jury may at any time examine the books and records of any special-purpose assessing or taxing district located wholly or partly in the county or the local agency formation commission in the county, and, in addition to any other investigatory powers granted by this chapter, may investigate and report upon the method or system of performing the duties of such district or commission.”

METHOD

The Grand Jury took the following steps:

1. Interviewed District administrators;
2. Interviewed AHS administrative and line staff personnel;
3. Interviewed parents of AHS students;
4. Reviewed various Atascadero Unified and Paso Robles Unified School District policies and procedures regarding discrimination and harassment; and
5. Reviewed California Department of Education codes and regulations pertinent to the issues.

BACKGROUND

Educators have long recognized the inseparable link between education and culture and society's basest forms of expression such as racism, sexism, and religious intolerance. Education and cultural awareness are tools to prevent prejudice, bigotry, and intolerance.

"Racism is man's gravest threat to man - the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason." Abraham Joshua Heschel

Community and Cultural Identity — The City of Atascadero can be described as a bedroom community where many residents commute either north or south for employment. The approximate racial makeup of Atascadero is 82% White, 11% Hispanic, 2% African American, 3% two or more races and 2% Native American.

Some Grand Jury witnesses highlighted issues of racial, religious and sexual orientation intolerance and insensitivity in the school district. There seems to be an it-can't-happen-here attitude and approach to issues of racism and religious intolerance on campus. Sexism and sexual harassment have been recent issues in the public eye and are, therefore, better addressed.

Atascadero High School — With a student body population of approximately 1,600 students, Atascadero High School is the second largest of the three north county public high schools. The racial makeup of AHS's student body is approximately 83% White, 13% Hispanic, 2% African

American, 1 % Asian, 0.6% Filipino and 0.4% Native American. AHS staff is 91% white and 4% Hispanic, with the remainder equally divided between African American, Pacific Islander, Asian, and Native American.

In 2004, a District and AHS survey indicated most parents and students felt that students were safe both enroute to, and at school. According to interviews with District and AHS staff, bullying and harassment are not considered significant problems on the AHS campus. However, other Grand Jury interviews did not validate this position. In addition, the editorial, “Campus Needs More Security” in the November, 2005 *Hilltop News*, a student publication, stated that fights, vandalism, and harassment are problems at AHS. The editorial contended that the most obvious weakness in AHS security is the presence of only one campus supervisor, and, “...it is simply impossible for one person to be in several places at once.”

The Grand Jury believes statements provided by witnesses and the student editorial accurately reflect the state of campus security. In an effort to improve campus security, AHS installed a campus surveillance system.

Racial Incidents — According to school authorities, during the 2004-05 school year there were 10 to 20 incidents of racial and sexual harassment at the high school. Most of the incidents were racial in nature, reflecting youthful insensitivity. Only two were considered serious enough to suspend or expel the student perpetrators. These two incidents were not examples of youthful ignorance. The students involved in these incidents were reported to be children, “...of strongly racist family upbringing.”

In addition to the 10 to 20 incidents, Grand Jury interviews disclosed a variety of daily incidents that may or may not have been reported to, or observed by AHS staff. One AHS staff member stated harassed students typically endure the harassment until they have had enough, and only then report the incidents. As is common among high school youth, there is an unwritten code of silence not to go to authority figures when encountering uncomfortable issues. Some students felt as if nothing would be done even if they had reported incidents to school authorities. This

perception of school inaction may be the result of legal requirements strictly protecting the confidentiality of individuals involved in the incidents.

In September 2004, a racial incident occurred on a district school bus. It took place at a bus stop, and involved several high school girls. There was some pushing and shoving, and racial epithets shouted at an African-American girl who was not caught up in the physical scuffle. The mother of the girl who yelled the racial epithet was present, and also involved as an aggressor, encouraging her daughter to further physical and verbal abuse.

The bus driver requested assistance from the Atascadero Police Department (APD). However, AHS authorities stated they learned of the incident only several days later, after parents of a student who witnessed the incident wrote a letter of concern to AHS. At the time of the Grand Jury interview with District administration, it was disclosed that the District had no record of the incident.

As a result of that incident, the District modified its reporting policy. The District and school sites are now working together in the area of inappropriate behavior of students while being transported to and from school activities.

In another incident, an AHS lunch table was defaced with several threatening racial epithets, upsetting many students. AHS administration felt the graffiti was inflammatory enough to classify the incident as a significant concern. APD was contacted, and photos were taken. According to some witnesses, to the dismay of much of the student body, the graffiti remained on the table for some time.

During that same time frame, an incident involving anti-gay graffiti occurred at the school. Grand Jury witnesses stated that AHS staff immediately addressed that incident. Via the school's public address system, the principal expressed disappointment in the student or group of students responsible for the graffiti. In contrast, the lunch table incident did not receive a public expression of disappointment. According to witnesses, many students and staff perceived that the racial incident was somehow less serious than the sexual harassment incident.

During the Grand Jury inquiry, witnesses testified that, on some occasions, school faculty had been present when students made insensitive racial remarks, and the teachers did not correct or reprimand the students who made the remarks. It was alleged these remarks might have been spoken in ignorance, and not meant to hurt or demean. These incidents highlight the need for sensitivity and diversity training for both faculty and students. In one case, incidents of this sort led concerned parents to remove their child from AHS and transfer the student to another high school.

Discipline — If a student has been identified as the perpetrator of a serious incident, that student may be suspended, or expelled from school. Suspension is a temporary removal from the school for up to five days. Expulsion is a significantly more serious discipline, and may result in a student missing a school year. Suspended or expelled students may be required to seek counseling before being allowed to return to campus. AHS students expelled for hate crimes may be required to seek counseling on their own before being readmitted. Witness testimony indicates that AHS and the District do not provide counseling for suspended or expelled students.

Reporting Incidents — Racial, religious and sexual harassment incidents are not necessarily reported beyond the school campus. District office policy only requires the reporting of incidents when the perpetrator is to be suspended or expelled. Vandalism and destructive incidents resulting in appreciable fiscal impact are reported to the District office as well.

The District reported only one racial and one sexual harassment incident at AHS in the 2004-05 school year. Even though AHS experienced 10-20 incidents, only two were considered reportable under District policy. AHS staff stated that harassment incidents, which are not reported to the District, are logged at the school in staff logs and a student information system. Witnesses stated logs of the incidents categorized as insignificant are destroyed at the end of the school year.

Protective Policies — All school districts are required by *California Education Code 35294.1 et seq.* to prepare and implement “Safe School Plans.” From the Grand Jury perspective, the AHS

safety plan meets *Education Code* requirements. A “Safe School Plan” sets forth comprehensive policies and procedures for providing learning environments which are free from physical and psychological harm. The policies include subject areas in violence prevention, crisis preparedness, and school environment management. This document sets forth policies on bullying and hate-motivated behavior management. “Safe School Plans” are updated on an annual basis.

The AHS Sexual Harassment Policy is a thoroughly researched and detailed document. Examples of sexual harassment and prohibited conduct are clear and to the point. The process for investigation of potential incidents and the enforcement of the policy is equally clear.

On the other hand, the policy regarding racial and religious harassment and discrimination is lumped together with nine other protected classes in a thirteen-sentence policy entitled, “Non-Discrimination/Harassment.” This policy is generic and extremely brief, providing none of the level of detail described in the “Sexual Harassment Policy.”

Education as a Defense — Racism, bigotry, and intolerance are examples of learned behavior. The education community is aware that education is the strongest deterrent to racism, bigotry, and intolerance. Education, coupled with role modeling and recognition of the issues, is key.

Witnesses informed the Grand Jury that the District neither offers nor requires an ongoing program of diversity or tolerance training for its staff. Tolerance issues are discussed in staff meetings and whenever necessary to address specific incidents. According to testimony, AHS staff is provided with a single diversity training session upon beginning employment with the District. There is a mandatory annual refresher course on sexual harassment, which District teachers, administrators, and counselors must attend. Tolerance training as a component of health classes is offered to District students.

There are no parent/teacher/student groups formed to engage specifically in the issues of racial and religious intolerance, bigotry and harassment. An outside example of this type of group is Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). PFLAG’s mission is to promote

the health and well being of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, their families and friends through support, education, and advocacy.

AHS's 'Greyhound Hot Topics' program meets monthly to discuss issues that parents, school faculty, and students feel are current and pressing. AHS administration also identifies the parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA), local Booster groups, school counselors, school principals, and the Student Advisory Council as platforms for bringing intolerance issues to the surface. By their nature, these approaches to bringing intolerance issues to light tend to be reactive rather than proactive.

Paso Robles High School (PRHS) is recognized in the local education community as a school campus of diversity, tolerance and strong pride in recognizing students' differences. PRHS offers an annual program for its students called "Challenge Day." The program's facilitators gather student leaders from all areas of school culture groups. Young leaders from diverse groups like, "...*Goths, school band, Hispanic kids, sports kids, gangster-wannabes, ...*" are brought together with parents to discuss their differences and similarities. After their meetings, the young leaders return to their respective groups with fresh perceptions of others and the ability to impart what they have learned.

Using PRHS's success as a model, AHS will be implementing the "Challenge Day" program in school year 2006-07. AHS will run its program concurrently with PRHS, following the same format. Both high schools will be working closely together to ensure a successful event.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: AHS reports a racial, sexual, or religious harassment incident to the District only when it is serious enough for the perpetrator to be suspended or expelled. Vandalism and destructive incidents resulting in appreciable financial impact are also reported to the District.

Finding 2: Incidents not reported to the District are simply logged at the high school. Not all harassment incidents are reported to the AHS Principal. Nearly all of the logged entries are discarded at the end of the school year.

Finding 3: In 2004-05, AHS estimated there were 10 to 20 incidents of racial or sexual harassment. Only two resulted in suspension or expulsion. Most of the incidents were racial in nature.

Finding 4: Not all incidents of racial, sexual, and religious harassment are reported to school or law enforcement authorities.

Finding 5: District administration has a record of only one racial harassment incident at AHS in school year 2004-05.

Finding 6: AHS has no formal counseling program for those students who are suspended or expelled for committing racial, sexual or religious harassment offenses. Students must seek counseling outside the school system.

Finding 7: The AHS safety plan contains a well prepared, lengthy, and complete “Sexual Harassment Policy.”

Finding 8: The AHS safety plan contains thirteen sentences of generic language prohibiting discrimination, “... *with respect to age, ethnic groups, religion, gender, sexual orientation, color, race, national origin, ancestry, and physical or mental disability.*”

Finding 9: Tolerance and diversity issues are discussed in staff meetings and whenever necessary to address specific incidents. Sexual Harassment training is the only related training done on an annual basis. Tolerance training is offered to District students as a component of health classes.

Finding 10: AHS does not have any parent/teacher/student support-groups to specifically address issues of racial and religious harassment.

Finding 11: The perception is that AHS administration places a greater degree of importance on incidents of sexual harassment over those of racial harassment.

Finding 12: Fights, vandalism and harassment continue to be problems at AHS. AHS’s security coverage has been identified as a weak link in campus safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Grand Jury recommends the District and AHS develop and implement two separate policies, each addressing racial harassment and religious harassment. Each policy should be as extensive in scope, language and definition as the current AHS Sexual Harassment Policy. If implementation of such policies requires approval from specific State agencies, then the District should pursue immediate approval to prevent any delay in policy implementation. (Finding: 7, 8, & 11)

Recommendation 2: As an integral part of racial and religious harassment education and prevention, the District and AHS should pursue the formation of a volunteer advisory committee made up of concerned parents, teachers, and students. The committee would focus on: (1) racial and religious harassment and, (2) education on diversity and tolerance. The District should seek the input of these advisory committees in the development of policy, staff and student training and curricula. (Finding 10)

Recommendation 3: AHS and the District should immediately modify the current procedures regarding the reporting of racial, sexual, and religious harassment incidents. The Grand Jury believes all harassment incidents involving race, religion, and sexual orientation are significant and may be harbingers of more serious trouble. For that reason, the Grand Jury believes all such harassment issues must be reported to the District office whether the offender(s) is known or not.

By eliminating the filtering of crucial information at the school level, the District will: (1) be aware of the scope and frequency of such incidents, (2) be able to develop and apply necessary disciplinary procedures, (3) be able to stay current with related events, both in the community and the school district, and (4) be prepared to develop related policies and procedures which directly address the issues. (Findings 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5)

Recommendation 4: Beginning immediately, the District should develop and implement a comprehensive tolerance training program for all District staff. This mandatory comprehensive training course should be offered at least once every school year to all District employees. (Findings 9 & 11)

Recommendation 5: The District should immediately develop and begin comprehensive tolerance, sensitivity, and diversity training programs for all District K-12 students. The District educational curricula should address issues of cultural and religious significance as a routine

classroom component. For example, “Black History Month” provides an opportunity to highlight African American contributions and experiences. (Finding 9)

Recommendation 6: AHS should immediately begin to identify racial and religious harassment as destructive forces in the same manner as sexual harassment. (Findings 9 & 11)

Recommendation 7: The District should begin a program of sensitivity counseling for students who are suspended or expelled for committing any harassment. (Finding 6)

Recommendation 8: The District should re-evaluate the need for additional security, with a focus on fights, bullying, and harassment at AHS and other campuses. (Finding 12)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

- ø **The Atascadero High School: Due 07/27/06 (All Findings and Recommendations 1, 2, 3 & 6)**
- ø **The Atascadero Unified School District: Due 08/25/06 (All Findings and Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 & 8)**

CONCLUSION

The Grand Jury feels strongly that racial and religious harassment in the schools must not be tolerated at any level. Indeed, harassment in any form is unacceptable. We feel the Atascadero Unified School District must stay alert for signs of hidden and open racism and religious intolerance in the schools, and swiftly move to battle intolerance in any apparent form.

What can parents and the schools do? The California Attorney General’s office says parents and schools must forcefully speak out against hate and intolerance. District staff and educators must clearly speak out in favor of diversity and tolerance, support victims of harassment and bullying, and form a network of students, parents and faculty to deal with harassment and bullying. The goal is to celebrate diversity and recognize the power of variety in thought and culture. We must teach our children the immeasurable value in cultural and ethnic diversity that should be an integral part of our American history.

“Every man is guilty of all the good he did not do.” Voltaire